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THE DUST TO EARTH, THE SPIRIT TO GOD.

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DISCOURSE

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DISCOURSE.

ECCLESIASTES, XII, 7.

‘Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.’

THE wise king of Israel here describes in brief the two component parts of which man is constituted, — body, the part allied to dust, — and spirit, the part allied to God. He had just given a beautiful description of the days of weakness and dissolution, which sooner or later must come to every human being. The several parts in the process of this work of decay he sets forth in striking and picturesque images, which give us as vivid a representation as if the whole had come from the hands of a painter; and the last scene he sketches in the expressive words of the text, ‘then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.’

The word which is here translated *spirit* has given occasion to differences of interpretation. By some it is supposed to mean, not the soul or the intellectual part of man, but the vital breath, or principle of life; when this is said to return to God, the meaning is just the same as to say, that the person

dies, or that the breath of life is rendered back to Him who gave it. This is generally the interpretation of those, who suppose that in the Old Testament there is no distinct and positive exhibition of the doctrine of a future state of existence. But this explanation of the word in question, seems at least somewhat unnatural and forced. *Spirit* here stands in contrast, or antithesis, to the body, and would therefore seem most properly to signify the soul, or spiritual principle in man. This signification the word undoubtedly sometimes bears in the Hebrew Scriptures ; it would certainly appear to require such an interpretation in the passage before us, if in any place.

When it is said that ‘the dust shall return to the earth as it was,’ there is a manifest allusion to that sentence recorded in the first part of the book of Genesis, in which God is represented as saying to disobedient man, ‘dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.’ In this sentence we trace the same figurative character, which prevails throughout the record of the creation of the world, of the animals, and especially of man. When it is said that God formed the human body from the dust of the earth, the expression is evidently a figurative one, to signify the frail and perishing nature of the body. The idea is not physically true, at least so far as we may judge from what we now know of the composition of the human frame. But, we must remember that this early record of creation is fashioned according to the conceptions, which naturally prevailed in the first rude ages of the world. Now the obvious process

of thought would lead to such a representation as that which we here find. It was observed that when the body, upon the change produced by death, fell into a state of decay and dissolution, it was found to crumble into dust and ashes. In speaking of the origin of the body, therefore, it was natural for man, in the simplicity of that early period of speculation, to ascribe its composition to the same substance, into which it appeared to be resolved after the organization of life had ceased, and to say that it was formed from the dust of earth, because it turned to dust at last. In this, as in other instances, we see how unjust and irrational it would be to look for scientific accuracy, or philosophical precision, in the records of creation, composed in conformity with the rude conceptions of mankind in the earliest ages of the world. It is more to the purpose of edification to remark, that the image by which the origin of the body is thus described, is well adapted to express the frailty and short duration of our animal frame; and to this moral purpose alone can we make an application of it.

Having offered these preliminary observations, I proceed to remark that the text leads us to consider the two component parts of man's constitution, the bodily and spiritual, the mortal and the immortal part. These two should ever be considered in their mutual connection, since God has placed them together, and united them by subtile and mysterious ties, which, if we cannot explain, we can at least observe. Some unhappy errors, both in speculation and practice, have arisen from separating in our

thoughts what God has thus joined for wise purposes. The influence of each part upon the other is too plain and striking to be mistaken ; and if we will not receive or construe our being as God has given it, we shall pervert it from its true purpose, and fail of deriving from it the happiness and improvement it was designed to afford.

1. It is affirmed that ‘ the dust shall return to the earth, as it was.’ This bodily frame shall at last dissolve, and crumble into its elementary parts. Thus frail and perishable is its nature, because it was designed to answer only a temporary purpose. Yet, however inferior the body may be in its constitution, or brief in its duration, when compared with our better part, still it is such a structure as ought to draw from us expressions of admiration and gratitude to that Divine Wisdom which hath framed it. It seems ever to have been the error of mankind, to carry to an extravagant length sentiments in themselves good. Thus because the animal frame is, in its nature and purposes, inferior to the undying spirit, it has been thought that no measure should be observed in vilifying and degrading it. This has been particularly the case with certain speculative minds, and certain stern religionists, who have made high pretensions to spirituality, but who have forgotten that in order to be spiritual it is not necessary to despise or underrate any of God’s gifts, and that the body is his gift as well as the soul. Some of the ancient philosophers considered all the evil in the world as owing to the mind’s being forced into union with matter in this state of being ; and one of

them went so far as to declare that he was ashamed of having a body. To the same way of thinking we are to ascribe these unreasonable penances and absurd mortifications of the flesh, to which monks and other fanatics have resorted in different periods of the history of the church, their self-inflicted tortures, their scourgings, their fastings, their standing for a long time in the most painful positions, their living in caves and deserts, and the other expedients, by which they endeavored to do as much violence as possible to the body, to bid defiance to its wants, to crush its natural propensities, and to inflict upon it chastisement as upon a criminal, vainly imagining that in proportion as the animal frame was tortured and beaten down, the soul would be purified and saved. These extravagances have for the most part passed away from the christian world; but remnants of the same influence and the same way of thinking, are still seen among us in that irrational and fanatical spirit, with which the innocent enjoyments of life, and the harmless pleasures of the body, are sometimes denounced as if they were deadly sins, or at least unworthy of the christian character. The body, which God has constituted, and given for our use and our help, should not be thus vilified. It is in itself a monument to the wisdom and goodness of the Creator. Its parts and functions bear witness to the skill and power of a designing cause; inso-much, that among the various marks and indications, by which the attention of man is led from the outward works upward to the Great Agency of the universe, there are none more striking and powerful

than those furnished by the structure of our own bodies ; and perhaps more doubters have been convinced, and more believers confirmed, by the anatomy of the human frame, or by the construction of some of its parts, than by any other facts in the external world. Then, too, the body, if it be wisely governed, and its several functions used with that temperance which is their law of happiness and health, becomes the source of various enjoyments, not enjoyments of the highest order indeed, but still such as should excite the offering of gratitude to Him who opens for us these sources of innocent pleasures.

For these reasons, no one should despise the body. It is the workmanship of God, and to be held and used with gratitude and in wisdom. But, after all, it is merely the instrument of the soul ; and when in the councils of God, its purpose has been answered, it is thrown by as an instrument no longer useful. Then, what we call death, takes place ; for death is only the dissolution of this external covering, this earthly lodgment of the mind. The manifestations of the soul towards the beings around, cease in that form. The eye, which brightened in the expression of the interior life, is quenched and closed in darkness. The hand, which we were accustomed to take in testimony of kindness, now lies torpid and motionless, and returns not our grasp of friendship or anxiety. The voice, which welcomed us with the accents of affectionate interest, or imparted wise counsels and just thoughts, is now hushed in that deep silence which seems full of solemn mystery ;

and those lips open no more to tell us we are welcome, or to give advice and consolation. Over that countenance, on which the varied expressions of the mind were seated, a cold, blank, stern paleness has settled, and every feature is fixed in hard, unalterable, fearful sameness. And thus it is with that whole frame, which but recently was quick and vigorous as our own. Yes, it is as the preacher of Israel hath said, ‘the dust returns to the earth as it was.’ Thus ends the history of the body, the animal frame; thus it has always ended; thus it will always end; dust to dust, earth to earth, ashes to ashes.

2. But this is not the whole of the history of that being called man. It is indeed but a part, and the least important part of it. For the voice of reason unites with that of Scripture in proclaiming, that ‘the spirit returns unto God who gave it.’ We have just spoken of the dissolution of the body; and how prone we are to think, and to act as if we thought that this is the dissolution of the whole being! How hard it is to realize, when that which we have seen and heard is gone, that there is still something which lives, and thinks, and improves! Our eyes see it not; our ears hear it not; our hand grasps it not. Where then, curiosity asks, anxiety intreats, where and what is it? The answer is still in the words of the royal preacher, ‘the spirit, the spirit, returns to God who gave it.’ Yes, to God who gave it; it goes home to its Father’s house; it wings its flight back to the Source whence it came forth. That fire, over which it seemed as if the grave had

placed an extinguisher, is lighted up again at the fountain of everlasting light. That vital principle of spiritual existence has left the form, in which for a while it was a tenant, and its dwelling-place now is nearer to the throne of the Eternal. God *gave* it says the preacher; yes, and in giving it, he gave a pledge that it should not die. This pledge we have in its very nature, in what it is, and what it does. 'The characters of immortality are stamped broadly and deeply on the soul. What is there in death, that extinguishes, or has a tendency to extinguish thought, and moral power, and spiritual improvement? Nothing; for it is simply a change with regard to organs and functions; the principle which moved and acted by them is independent of them, and may take other forms or other instruments.

In order to realize the truth of the spirit's immortality, it is necessary to have distinctly in view what this spiritual principle accomplishes, and how it develops itself. What then do we see, when we look at those in whom the powers of the mind and heart are brought out and improved? We see them gifted with capacities, which, when they have been extended to the utmost, are still far within the range that they might take, and which have an appetite for knowledge and enlargement of thought, just as distinctly as the body has an appetite for food. We observe feelings and affections of a higher kind, than any which belong to earth, and which admit of a continually increasing purity, a continually expanding elevation. We see in them the proofs of a relation to God, which develops itself more and

more in proportion as it is cultivated, an opening of the soul, if I may so say, towards the great Source of being and happiness, a sentiment that there is a part of their nature which belongs to the Father of spirits, and can be satisfied with nothing less than His favor and approbation. We see them spending life in imitation of the example, and in obedience to the precepts of the Saviour, approving themselves to be his disciples, not merely by name and profession, but by doing the things which he has commanded, giving their hearts to God and to goodness by making it their meat and their drink to do the will of their Father in heaven. We see them laboring to do good among their fellow-men, to build up the cause of truth and righteousness, to spread the knowledge and the power of religion, to lighten the burdens of the oppressed, to relieve the distressed, to shed the solace of kindness over the calamities of their fellow-beings, to mitigate the pains of sickness, and to warm even the chill of death. We find them acting under the great law of duty, as under the presence of a divine principle, and listening with reverent obedience to the voice of conscience, as the echo of the voice of God. These, I say, are the manifestations of the spirit that dwells in man. These things we have all seen in the living, breathing, acting forms of those whom we have loved for their kindness, and respected for their many virtues. And now are we to suppose — can we believe — that all this is buried in the grave? that these are things which can be blotted out forever by the change which death brings over these bodily organs? As well might we

think that the dark clouds in the sky have quenched the light of the glorious sun in the firmament. No, oh no; these are the works of the spiritual part of man; and though the dust returns to the earth as it was, yet these not only survive, but go forth free from the embarrassments of earth into better scenes of action and enjoyment; for all heaven and all earth, all reason and all revelation, echo from one to another the assurance, that ‘the spirit shall return to God who gave it;’ in what forms, and in what scenes, we know not; but it shall return to God who gave it; and they who have sought the kingdom of God and its righteousness, may well say with the Apostle of old, ‘we know whom we have believed, and are persuaded that he is able to keep that which we have committed unto him against that day.’

What, now, are the inferences, that should be drawn from the view which has been taken?

1. We should feel how much more worthy of our care and culture is the spirit, the immortal principle, than the animal frame, the perishable part of our constitution. I have already said that we are not to despise or neglect the body. It is given for purposes of usefulness and enjoyment, and for such it should be held. But we must never lose sight of the great fact, that its office and nature are inferior and temporary, that the purpose for which this instrument was made ceases with death, and that death is at hand with each one of us. How seldom, comparatively, is this just estimate formed and acted upon. Look round on the world, and observe how many there are, who think only, yes only, what

they shall eat, what they shall drink, and werewithal they shall be clothed. What is it that calls forth the hardest labors, and engages the most watchful efforts of the mass of mankind? What is it that clouds the brow with anxiety, and nerves the arm with strength, and kindles the zeal of competition? Is it not, for the most part, the care of the body, or of that which is connected with the body? Is it not to make provision for the comfort, the beauty, and the luxury of this animal frame, on which the traces of death are already drawn, and which, we know, must speedily return to the earth as it was? Meanwhile, where is our care for the immortal part? Where is the anxiety for spiritual culture? Where is the provision for that imperishable element, the soul, which the foot of time can never tread out, which all the waters of death cannot extinguish? Is not all this lamentably wanting? Do not men slumber over the gift of God that lies within them, and go to their graves without knowing its worth? My christian friends, let us, in all reason, form more just estimates, and act upon them; let us believe that God has placed his image within us, and that it is found in the spiritual nature of every human being; let us feel that we utterly mistake the whole purpose of existence, so long as we neglect the culture and improvement of this nature; and when the spirit shall be called to return to God who gave it, O let it return purified, and strengthened, and meet for its Father's house, adorned and refined in every feature of moral loveliness, and prepared for higher and better degrees of resemblance to the eternal Model of purity and holiness.

2. To the views that have now been presented, let us resort for consolation, when the good and the beloved are taken from us by death. It is the privilege and the glory of our religion, that we learn from it to think and speak of the departure of such, not as those would think and speak who have no hope. No hope! O were it so, what should we be? What should we be, if every hope went down into the grave with the body which we deposit there amidst tears and lamentations; and if when we return from that last sad service of humanity, we were compelled to say, all now is gone, all that we loved and respected, all that made us happy in the virtues of the departed, is now covered over with the coldness and darkness of everlasting sleep, and all is now closed up in endless oblivion. Were it so, it seems to me the very light of the sun would assume a pale and sickly hue, the earth would be wrapped in a cheerless mist, and every beautiful star above would seem like a vast hearse bearing its inhabitants to the darkness of annihilation. But, blessed be God, the christian has better thoughts than these, thoughts which cause the beautiful light of heaven to shine around the cloud of sorrow, and impart to it golden hues. We bury the body, for that is the end, when it returns to earth as it was. But we do not bury, we cannot bury, the spiritual nature. God claims it back again; and all the powers of earth cannot detain it. The virtuous and the beloved, then, are not lost. They have done good on earth; they have followed in the steps of him, who lived and died to bless mankind; they have brought the best offerings of their affections,

and the authority of their example to the cause of goodness ; they have cultivated their moral nature under the influence of the principles of the Gospel, and they have been known, as our Saviour said his true disciples should be known, by their fruits. When the form in which they acted here is extinct, are they, the thinking, spiritual agents, extinct ? Does not every feeling of the heart cry out against the supposition ? Yes, and to that feeling the voice of divine truth responds fully and strongly. Here then is our consolation when we mourn for the good ; ‘ they have finished their course, they have kept the faith ; henceforth there is laid up for them a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give them ’ in the day of recompense.

These are some of the reflections to which we are led by the passage of Scripture now before us. I cannot but remark in this connection, that I am pleased to see that the solemn and impressive words of my text have been selected for an inscription over the lofty gateway leading to that beautiful Cemetery, which has recently been prepared in our vicinity. It is an appropriate and happy selection. Under the lovely forest shades, in the flowery nooks, by the pleasant walks, and in the beautiful solitudes of Mount Auburn, there will be gathered, as we may suppose, in the course of years, a great city of the dead. It is fitting that over the avenue to such a place it should be written, as it is, ‘ THE DUST SHALL RETURN TO THE EARTH AS IT WAS, AND THE SPIRIT SHALL RETURN UNTO GOD WHO GAVE IT.’ It is thus we should think of our mortality, and with

these holy and gentle associations should it ever be blended.

The admonitions of God's providence, my christian friends have of late been much among us. The winter now passing away has been marked by an unusual number of deaths in our village ; and among these we have been called to follow to the grave, three of the most respected and beloved members of our church, in quick succession.*

O 'tis well

With them. But who knows what the coming hour,
Veil'd in thick darkness, brings for us !

What the morrow may bring forth, it is not for us to know. Well, then, we will go on our way, serving God and doing good to man ; we will remember what rewards there are for the faithful servant above ; and at the same time, like the good who have left us, we will remember that these rewards are to be won only by being faithful here to duty, to conscience, and to God.

* Mrs Charlotte Whitney died February 17, aged 40 years ; Mrs Abigail Bemis February 19, aged 75 years ; and Miss Hannah S. Coolidge March 9, aged 46 years.



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